

Film as a Producer of Meaning: Peter Wollen and 1970s British Structuralism

El film como máquina de sentido: Peter Wollen y el estructuralismo británico en la década de 1970

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Abstract

This article retrieves the proposals of British cine-structuralism and examines Peter Wollen's ideas in his book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* that played a crucial role in the constitution of a new critical perspective. Drawing from Claude Lévi-Strauss' anthropology, the British structuralists during the 1970s conceived films as a system of messages ruled by a code. Facing the risks implied in the "cult of personality" (as it could be verified in the notion of *auteur* proposed by *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s), the critics associated with the journal *Screen* worked on the materiality of forms, conceiving the authorial figure as a consequence –not as the origin– of the work. Wollen's book embodies that moment of transition where the figure of the spectator is revalued and begins to perform a central role in art and communication studies.

Keywords: *Screen* Journal, British cine-structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Peter Wollen.

Resumen

Este artículo es una revisión teórica del cine-estructuralismo británico y recupera los planteamientos de Peter Wollen en su libro *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* que fue fundamental para la constitución de una nueva perspectiva de análisis crítico. Apoyándose en la antropología de Claude Lévi-Strauss, los estructuralistas británicos de los años setenta pensaron los films como un sistema de mensajes gobernados por un código. Frente a los riesgos del "culto a la personalidad" (como se verificaba en la noción de *autor* propuesta por *Cahiers du cinéma* en los años cincuenta), los críticos vinculados a la revista *Screen* trabajaron sobre la materialidad de las formas, pensando en la figura del autor como consecuencia y no como fundamento de la obra. El libro de Wollen encarna ese momento de transición donde se revaloriza la figura del espectador, que empezará a ocupar un lugar central en los estudios sobre arte y comunicación.

Palabras clave: Revista *Screen*, cine-estructuralismo británico, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Peter Wollen.

1. Introduction

First published in *Cahiers du cinema* in the 1950s, the *politique des auteurs* were appropriated by British magazines toward the end of the 1960s (Roggen, 2013; Hedling, 2003). Truffaut first mentions the expression, *politique des auteurs* in his article "Sir Abel Gance", where he questions those that value the silent films he directed and despised his spoken movies. To him, the distinction is absurd, both types of film were created by the same genius director and—as the critic poses—genius doesn't age (19554a: p. 5). To think of auteurs and not of the work itself is to defend the director's efforts to produce the screenwriters' script, in addition to fulfilling the studio's ambition of creating a product. .

The *politique des auteurs* is violently confrontational with the *tradition of quality* that distinguishes French cinema of the 40s and 50s. Truffaut however, considered these oft celebrated films nothing more than the production of screenwriters, and their entire prestige rests on the value of the literary works they were adapted from for screen, revealing a strictly limited concept of cinema as entirely subordinate to literature.¹ It is without doubt provocative, in this context, to assign auteurship of these films to the directors, especially when understood that they are a collective creative effort.² The previous notwithstanding, what is truly scandalous about the *politique des auteurs* is that these young critics elevated the following North American directors to the status of auteur, a position that until then had been considered nothing more than a mere studio employee, or, in the very best of cases, a craftsman: Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Otto Preminger, Jacques Tourneur, Samuel Fuller, Preston Sturges, Vincent Minelli, Nicholas Ray (De Baecque, 1991; Bickerton, 2009).

The *politique des auteurs* was never posed as a theory but rather as a somewhat arbitrary exaltation of the critics' personal preferences. In the magazine *Screen*, François Truffaut's celebrated hypothesis, taken from Giraudoux ("there are no works, there are only auteurs"), is mandatorily subjected to the paradigm of structuralism, especially when also considering Claude Lévi-Strauss's studies on myths (1987). Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Peter Wollen, Jim Kitses, Alan Lovell, Paul Willemen and Ben Brewster all form part of the heterogeneous trend

known as auteur-structuralism or cine-structuralism (Henderson, 1973; Brewster, 1971; Eckert, 1973). Critics, referring to innovation first introduced in structural anthropology, seek to scientifically legitimize film studies. That legitimization implied a certain institutionalization: the transformation of a policy [*politique*] of auteur into (an auteur) theory.

In John Caughie's words: "What structuralism offered in the way of practical critique, was an objective method of analyzing a body of film to discover thematic-patterns that inform them (...) instead of the inappropriate manner of the romantic artist that intentionally and consistently expresses their own bias" (1990: p. 126). From De Barthes to Metz, *Screen* transits on the paths of structuralism to emerge in the nascent semiology that had promise in its scientific approach toward cinema. Toward the end of the 60s this was indubitably a novel development. But, in addition to the previous, the reformulation of certain prior assumptions in film theory would have overriding consequences that would extend until the present day. When revising the concepts of author, work and audience, the experience of structuralism opened up new perspectives that were productive not only in the field of cinema, but also in cultural and communications studies (Rosen, 1977; Robbins, 1979, Mascarello, 2001).

The present article focuses on the book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* by Peter Wollen, first published in 1969. The importance of this text is today at risk of being set aside, not because of obsolescence, but because it has become such an integral part of the way we think about film that it has become second nature. Wollen's operation was so innovative at the time that, and perhaps of because of this, it posed a whole set of questions that could not be solved or closed. In his attempts to escape a romanticized formulation of the concept of auteur—such as that achieved in *Cahiers du cinema*—Wollen's book reveals the difficulties with certain concepts when they are appropriated by new theory; but—and this is the hypothesis of this essay—the internal debate embodied in the book is still relevant today. It indicates the moment of transition and announces the revaluation of the audience. That revaluation immediately becomes fundamental to articulating new critical perspectives seen from the viewpoint of subalternity, feminism and the developing world.³

2. British Structuralism and Auteur Theory in Film

2.1. Cine-structuralism

Unlike what was happening in France in the wake of recent war, in Great Britain the rise in debate on film was associated with academic activity: very often critics were students or graduates that were forming their first relationships with film thanks to student film clubs, and subsequent articles published in university newsletters such as: *Sequence*, *Oxford Opinion*, *Movie* (Bolas, 2009; Gibbs, 2013). When *Screen* burst onto the scene in Great Britain, in 1969 the enemy was no longer *cinéma de qualité* but a form of critique that mirrored perhaps too closely liberal values. In the passing from one context to another, there was a certain amount of divergence. On the one hand, a distancing from the practice of cinematography (Truffaut and Godard thought like film makers, while the writers of *Screen* thought like theorists), and on the other, the foundation of critique as a field of specific action. In the 1960s, *Movie* was hailed as the heir apparent to *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and had used all the posited hypotheses on auteurship to face down the conformity present in publications such as *Sight and Sound*. During the 1970s, *Screen* also sought the French limelight in the wake of the French magazine, although not the Bazinian *Cahiers*, now the model to emulate was the post-68 *Cahiers*, used to offer opposition to *Sight and Sound* (which in effect represented the establishment), and also *Movie* (which was considered the modern, intellectual, thought-provoking publication).

Movie used a more analytical language, far-removed from the impressionist perspective, but it was precisely for that reason that its close readings tended to exclude any attempt at a deeper generalization. *Movie* is the magazine for critique, but the perspective adopted by *Screen* is purely theoretical. It is no coincidence that one publication is called "Movie", in reference to the object, given that it deals with movies, while the other called "Screen" refers to a device: the screen is the ideological framework where the conditions of production and reception meet (the magazine uses movies to foster dialogue about the theory of film). Just as Lovell proposes in his auteur-structuralist method: "All directors create their films on the ba-

sis of a central structure and (...) all their films can be seen as variations or developments thereof" (1969, p. 47-48). Structuralism not only enables critical thought on the completed works, above all it focuses on certain functions therein (the auteurs therefore are the result or a consequence of the work itself).

The cornerstone of British structuralism is the book *Luchino Visconti* by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith: a comprehensive study of the filmmaker's work up until 1967 (although in subsequent editions the author added new films until it eventually covered the entire body of work). In the introduction, Nowell-Smith explains that the theory of authorship, to him, is a "methodological principle" in the measure that it reveals structural connections between films, connections that go beyond the theme of the movie. It is these connections that provide a cohesive quality and maintain unity throughout:

One essential corollary of the theory as it has been developed is the discovery that the defining characteristics of an author's work are necessarily those which are most readily apparent. The purpose of the criticism thus becomes to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a hard core of basic and often recondite motifs. The patterns formed by these motifs is what gives an author's work its particular structure, both defining it internally and distinguishing one body of work from another (2003, p. 10-11).

The previous notwithstanding, Nowell-Smith acknowledges that an exclusively structuralist approach to Visconti's films would only be a partial analysis, as it consists of a filmography whose subject matter and stylistic patterns have changed significantly over time. That is why, although it preserves references to elements of continuity in his body of work, the book proposes varying specific analyses of each film. This evidences how he still regards Visconti in the traditional manner, as a figure that precedes the films. In this sense, he does not intend to adhere entirely to structuralism, rather he uses it as an analytical tool. It was not until the publication of *Signs and Meaning* in the Cinema, published the following year, that there would be a study that approached film using a structural method, and in so doing, provided a

more general characterization on the function of auteurship in cinema.

2.2. Genre and Author

Peter Wollen's book had an immediate impact (Rudowick, 2012). His influence on film studies would extend beyond his era and the restrictive field of semiology. The argument was developed along three axes: the salvaging of Eisenstein as the baseline theorem, the formulation of semiology applied to film, and the redefining of the concept of auteur making it the preferred tool for critical reflection. The latter rendered Wollen's book the new manifesto on critical thought regarding authorship, taking up the ideas found in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, but at the same time, transforming them completely. The closest precursor is obviously Nowell-Smith's book on Visconti, a reference Wollen quotes to frame his own reflections on the structuralist perspective. As mentioned earlier, in *Luchino Visconti* the characteristics that define a film maker's work (that "hard core of basic and often recondite motifs") are not easily observable, rather they must be discovered within what is apparent. Wollen concludes: "it is this 'structural approach', as Nowell-Smith calls it, which is indispensable for the critic" (1972, p. 80). The book by Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (1969), is also built on the premise for structural thought. The difference between what is introduced in Wollen's and Kitses books compared to Nowell-Smith's pioneering work is based on the choice of subject. Because although the latter is primarily interested in a European film maker, genre is central to the analysis. Hawks is no longer an auteur that transcends the rigid norms of genre (as first posed by critics in *Cahiers du Cinéma*), rather it is the result of a dialectic game between archetypes. This isn't despite genre but because of the determined structure of opposition. In this collective outline, genre serves as an analysis of myth: the perspective was not only mandatorily left out of the book on Visconti, it was also practically non-existent in the initial articles on the *politique des auteurs*. In this sense, Levi-Strauss's influence made it possible to lift the interdiction that weighed down genre in *Cahiers*.

The French critics would choose certain Hollywood directors, but they were not interested in the

historic development of genre. Whenever they wrote about their preferred stateside directors, they would celebrate them as though they were auteurs acting against genre. Genre was important as a set of anonymous conventions that imprisoned filmmakers and it was despite these conventions that said directors would transcend; their staging of the scene was their artistic effort toward finding their own style. That is why Rhomer could admire Ford or Hawks but still declare a disinterest in westerns. *Horizons West*, however, posited that genre is essential to North American filmmakers. The book approaches the genre backwards in order to move forward: it disassembles the auteurship model put forward in *Cahiers*, and moves backward through time to find the collective structures that form the genre (its "internal operations") and from them extracts the style and manner in which each director created their respective movies. This is how Antony Mann, Budd Boetticher and Sam Peckinpah—the three directors studied in the book—find their essence within the western. In other words, auteur and genre feed into each other. According to Kitses:

The western is not just the men who have worked within it. Rather than an empty vessel breathed into by the filmmaker, the genre is a vital structure through which flow a myriad of themes and concepts. As such the form can provide a director with a range of possible connections and the space in which to experiment, to shape and refine the kind of effects and meanings he is working towards. We must be prepared to entertain the idea that auteurs grow, and that genre can help to crystallize preoccupations and contribute actively to development. (1969, p. 26-27).⁴

Kitses inverts the Bazin formula: it isn't that certain directors insistently return to the western to discover the essence of the genre, rather they persevere within the western because it is there that they find their own essence. For British structuralist critics, the mechanisms of genre are similar to those of myths (the repetition of motif, an oppositional system, the roles of characters in the story). They are a narrative structure with fixed functions, they have no author and are known by all. The western in all appearances seems a place particularly suited to testing these hypotheses, because it is a genre whose mechanisms are the closest

to the function of myth. Kites' dedication to the genre is no casual coincidence, nor is Wollen's use of Hawks or Ford as the preferred examples. Hollywood westerns generally tend to take place during the Indian Wars (1865 – 1890), which is to say: the creating of a border between civilization and the Wild West, a founding legend for the creation of the United States. From the "genius of system" to mythological thinking: resorting to Lévi-Strauss (1972a) makes it possible to scientifically re-establish the hidden connection (hidden by the critics of Cahiers) between American cinema and its auteurs.

2.3. The Structural Model

For Lévi-Strauss (1972b) the core of a myth is revealed by analyzing its different versions. Generally speaking, the core remains hidden to the narrators, and once separated from the story, its meaning often differs from what was initially perceived on the surface. One could say then that its meaning is not intentional or, at least, not consciously so. If it is indeed true that films in a genre function in much the same way, then the critic-ethnographer is who could extract or determine the deeper meaning in the work, meaning inaccessible to the auteur. In fact, the film-maker is built up to the status of auteur after the fact, when placed on the crosshairs of a set of structural parameters inherent to the genre in which they practice and insist upon throughout their careers. But, as maintained by Charles Eckert in an early article on British cine-structuralists: "Before movies can be equated with myths, they must fulfill one fundamental condition: they have to originate in a community that has a 'common conception of the world'. Only in such a community can the dialectical system typical of myth be coherent" (1973, p. 49). Eckert indicates that the history of film articulates from style (national cinema, international movements, studio production) and, despite how these codes threaten the dynamic flow of artistic development,

they are probably no less arbitrary than the "communities" that Lévi-Strauss defines for study. And they do reflect the fact that films are generally produced as communal efforts. Hollywood at its zenith resembled a complex social structure not unlike the family-clan-

village structures that Lévi-Strauss works with (1973, p. 49).

The grounds for *auteur-structuralism* is based on the assimilation of movie into myth. The previous notwithstanding, the similarity is only an initial superficial impression. It is not extensive enough to affirm that film is the modern development of myth. Although Eckert adopts a basically descriptive outlook, he does not refrain from criticizing the British structuralists; the latter fail to follow to the letter the hypotheses of Lévi-Strauss. However, problems also arise with the reverse situation: when they attempt to literally transfer the ideas of structural analysis without taking into consideration the objective of the study. It is evident that the structural study of myths has, to Wollen, instrumental significance. It is a model that works and one that therefore must be appropriated. The appropriation (be it partial, fragmented, localized) is perfectly legitimate. The problem arises rather when the mechanisms used by Lévi-Strauss are applied mechanically and dogmatically in cinematographic analysis. To rephrase: not when Wollen takes advantage —of what might be useful— of the structural method to analyze film (given that there too one can find a "core of repeated motifs") but rather when one intends to study film as if they were literally the technological avatar of myths (for example, when affirming that movies function in the same way as myths and fairy tales, and therefore allow for the same approach) (1972, p. 93).

Wollen progressed in the wake of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, however, he introduced a series of modifications. Although these modifications are often presented as corrective action, in some cases it was a matter of opinion, an opinion that was in frank contradiction of the ideas expressed by French critics. In the first line in the chapter on auteurship Wollen historically contextualizes his starting point: "*The politique des auteurs* —the author theory, as Andrew Sarris calls it— was developed by the loosely knit group of critics who wrote for *Cahiers du Cinéma* and made it the leading film magazine in the world" (1972, p. 74). Just as had happened with Sarris's translation, the statement seemed to indicate a synonymy, but was assuredly a slip in nomenclature. It was almost a terminological adaptation that would give the concept greater conceptual rigor. But the passing from *politique* to theory was not just a variation lending it a more

academic aspect, it would also reveal the first tentative attempt to convert the notion into a scientific category applied to the analysis of film. Wollen retains the option from the old *Cahiers* for certain popular movies and for a handful of North American filmmakers; but he approached the matter supported by a theoretical framework built on structuralism and semiology. It is no longer a somewhat arbitrary selection of directors (that stood out from their peers in so long as they left visible stylistic traits), it has now become an attempt to construct a general theory with principles yet to be established.

3. Peter Wollen: moving toward a new concept of cinematographic auteur

3.1 Ford vs. Hawks, Wollen vs. Wood

The strategy practice by the *politique des auteur* consisted in exalting the romantic inventiveness of genius at the core of the classicist system. Classicism relies on the existence of a universal code, which is to say homogeneous and relatively stable (which is definitively a utopian view of cinema genres); romanticism on the other hand, believes in an organic and unique unit where every detail expresses the whole (this is the impossible goal of the film).⁵ But both consider meaning as an emerging trait that can be isolated, but ultimately complies with the unit of a given film or the isomorphism of the code. Faced with the dichotomy of Classic and Romantic, elements organizing the general movements in art history, *Cahiers* offered no way out of the dilemma. Both dissimulated the absence of a solution using a clever and efficient formula that consisted in appreciating the romantic individuality within classic grammar; a grammar built on the uniformity of language. Regardless, the true threat to the strategy employed by *Cahiers du Cinéma* consisted in the frequent confusion between *auteur* and *metteur en scène*. Wollen distinguishes between the two in the following manner:

The work of the auteur has a semantic dimension, it is not purely formal; the work of the metteur en scène, on the other hand, does not go beyond the realm of performance, of transposing into the special complex of

cinematic codes and channels a pre-existing text: a scenario, a book or a play (...) the meaning of the films of an auteur is constructed a posteriori; the meaning – semantic, rather than stylistic or expressive – of the films of a metteur en scène exists a priori (1972, p. 78).

The distinction is not always so clear and, for that reason, many French critics (the Macmahonians, for example: Michel Mourlet, Pierre Rissiente, Jacques Serguide, Miche Fabre, Marc Bernard) salvaged and placed the *metteur en scène* above that of *auteur*: this explains the fanatical following of directors such as Walsh or Losey who were elevated to the status of icons. To Wollen, these directors only displayed a professionalism worthy of credit, while true auteurs made films that required a cosmovision built brick by brick with film material. It is a dynamic construction and for that very reason, one that changes: it takes into consideration the transformation of a filmmaker and must be completed via critical interpretation.

Wollen analyzes the work of Howard Hawks, using said analysis as a test case for auteur theory. Throughout his career, and despite having practiced his profession in different genres, it is possible to identify the same concerns, the same motifs: there is, so to speak, a *homo hawksianus* (just as Barthes affirms there is a *homo racinianus*) (1972, p. 81). But here is where Wollen departs from Nowell-Smith, because the structuralist view allows for the study of these films not just from a core of reiterated motifs, but also from a system of differences and opposition. As Lévi-Strauss states, the risk of circumscribing to an indication of similarities is equivalent to reducing all singular events to mere variations of an abstract and generalist matrix (that only shows what each case has in common, and therefore, explains nothing). The latter is why Wollen sustains that structural critiques must take into account the films' universality and singularity. Hawks would be a far less interesting director if his body of work were to constitute a homogenous block, but, his cinematic universe is organized around the contrast between his *adventure dramas* and his series of *crazy comedies*. Each is a functional inversion of the other, and in that system of resonance and antimony the body of work as a whole gains a dimension of complexity. It is in that dialogue of opposites that Hawks earns his status of auteur: behind the Apollonian

hero of his adventure movies, you always find the phantasm inversion in the bizarre anti-hero of his comedies.

For some directors this oppositional system is deeper and more complex than in others. The basic antimony in Ford's movies for example is between "the desert and the garden" (which is an adaptation of the opposition between nature and culture proposed by Lévi-Strauss); but here this relationship evolves throughout his body of work. "My own view" —writes Wollen— "is that Ford's work is much richer than that of Hawks and that this is revealed by a structural analysis; it is the richness of the shifting relations between antinomies in Ford's work that makes him a great artist, beyond being simply an undoubted *auteur*" (1972, p. 102).⁶ Just as there is a difference between *metteur en scène* and *auteur*, now Wollen also distinguishes between *auteur* and artist. Great cinematographers aren't those that limit themselves to reproducing a group of redundant motifs, moving from one film to the next, rather they explore and develop a varying principle that underlies the structure. It is a summarizing moment that arises when confronting the entirety of a body of work with each singular film, and implies the critic's efforts at deciphering. The problem is that for Wollen, Ford's greatest merit, placing him over Hawks, is revealed via structural analysis; which means that —instead of describing a narrative matrix— the reiterations, variations, oppositions and antinomies impose valorative criteria. While Lévi-Strauss's strategy consists in redirecting all versions to a basic form, Wollen seems to operate (without admission) in the opposite direction: collating genre variations serves to affirm that Ford's westerns are better. That is Wood's criticism: why do structural antinomies determine the difference between a great movie and a mediocre one? Robin Wood proposes "de-wollenizing" Hawks and questions the methodology because it is based on abstractions that are not corresponded in the concrete film examples. Do the concrete film examples, or abstraction that can be extracted from the director's corpus of work, matter? (Wood, 2006, p. 251).⁷ The scientific and objective perspective proposed by Wollen is therefore as subjective as any other, with the aggravating factor that it is hidden behind what appears to be an analytical method. For Wood, this legitimizes any preconception given that the interpretation does nothing more than find

what they were looking for: "it doesn't matter what cut of meat is put into the machine, you always get the same structuralist sausage" (2006, p. 244).⁸

3.2. *Auteur Theory*

What is true is that, for Wollen, style has an accessory role and he ultimately comes to consider it "noise" given that, at that level, the director's contribution is lost in a multiplicity of contributions (from the producer, actors, director of photography) which, in one form or fashion, throw up obstacles for transparency in structure. The films therefore, exist beyond the confines of style. Wollen says: "Myths, as Lévi-Strauss has pointed out, exist independently of style, the syntax of the sentence or musical sound, euphony or cacophony. The myth functions 'on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically in "taking off" from the linguistic ground on which it keeps Rolling" (1972, p. 105). For *Cahiers du cinéma*, the *auteur* was the style and expressed in *mise-en-scène*. Wollen, however, sustains that the *auteur* is structure and does not mainly arise from staging but rather from the interplay of antinomies that are distillable from an exhaustive analysis of a group of films. While *romantic auteurism* moved from the director to the films (which were overdetermined due to their impression), *structuralist auteurism* goes from the work to the director (which becomes a consequence of). When Eckert attempts to prove that in film, as in myth, meaning can remain hidden by the narrator, he affirms that "the dioscuric union of filmmakers and their audience produces a strange Janus of art – myths made by mythmakers that are only certified as true or untrue after they have been created. Perhaps the best index to authentically mythic films, then, is the yearly box-office ratings" (1973, p. 50). But if cinematographic myths are consecrated at the box-office, it is then almost an antithesis of what is proposed in a structural study of myth, that they are anonymous cultural forms always possessed of pre-existing truth. It is obvious that the perseverance of an oral story between listeners has very different motives to those that determine the commercial success of a film.

According to Brian Henderson Eckert's characterization of British critics exposes the absence of a "auteur-structuralist epistemology": "in activa-

ting these texts, Eckert has activated the scandal of their lack of foundation. Attempting to integrate them, they have come apart in his hands” (1973, p. 27). Henderson asks the question if the modalities of the study on myths can be applied to film, and whether structuralism can merge with *auteurism*. These questions are not identical, but...

both Wollen and Eckert assume this identity, though Eckert strains against the assumption, and his text cracks on it. Auteur-structuralism treats the two questions as one; specifically, it reduces the first question to the second. It thereby makes the study of films as myths dependent upon the fusion of auteurism and structuralism and effectively rules out other models of study (Henderson, 1973, p. 32).

In any case, if —as Wollen would have it— the auteur film could be understood as a “composition” that reveals a *posteriori* the director’s constitution as an auteur, then one would have to say then that a myth is pure performance whose collective enunciation erases any trace of auteurship. According to Lévi-Strauss (1968, p. 26), myths have no origin, no center, no theme, nor auteurs; but classifying a group of movies as the work of a filmmaker implies defining an origin, theme, center and auteur. The previous describes a function directly opposite to that of myth, but that contradictory assimilation is what Wollen is striving for. As Henderson demonstrates (1973, p. 31) Wollen begins by suggesting that his “structural perspective” on the body of work of Hawks has affinities with methods applied to the study of folklore and mythology, but immediately following the statement one sees these affinities become near perfect equivalencies that allow for an examination of Ford’s films using tools previously used for fairy tales. Henderson doesn’t go so far to mention that structuralism and auteur theory are absolutely incompatible; however, he does consider the project of so little promise that he suggests abandoning it (1973, p. 33).

For auteur-structuralism, the cognitive subject and object are instances established beforehand and are not modified during the process. On one side of the coin, the observer, and on the other, the phenomenon. But to take this link for granted and assume that its character is inalterable is an ideological excuse inherent to empiricism. In what measure therefore can a system of interpretation

question its own founding principles and theoretical presuppositions?

For these reasons the notion of auteur is (of the three sections in the book) the seemingly most vulnerable. It almost immediately undergoes major transformations after being submitted to post-structuralist analysis. In contrast to the chapter on Eisenstein and the chapter on semiology, reflections on the notion of auteur are those that most clearly demonstrate the book was written in a period of transition, and dynamically stages the transformation of theoretical categories.

4. Final Remarks

The editing of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* published in 1972 is an attempt to meet the challenge. Wollen added “Conclusion 1972” to the original version. In that addendum he explains that upon re-reading the book three years later, the parts he finds most valuable are the chapters on semiology and Eisenstein. He evidently establishes some distance from the ideas put forward in the chapter on auteur theory. In the new edition he doesn’t eliminate the chapter, but has written a conclusion that tempers or neutralizes it. The addition to the original book seems designed to correct or rewrite (more precisely to correct by re-writing) the chapter on auteur theory.

In 1969, Wollen was still evidently indecisive between returning to the original notion of Cahiers or giving it new meaning; in other words, he thought the concept was useful but had to be redefined considering that French acceptance was too closely associated to the individual persona of the director. In 1972, he desisted from any attempt to reformulate or update the former notion, at that point he only kept the denomination (in truth —how it was perceived— he seemed to preserve it despite introducing a key shift from *politique* to *theory*) while the definition of what an auteur is was wholly different. In this sense the confrontation between chapters “The Auteur Theory” and “Conclusion (1972)” is a privileged instance warning of the instability of the debate; the moment in which a paradigm of thought is replaced by another, in the same book and under the watchful eye of the reader. So,

what happened between the original publishing of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* and the new edited edition? The chapter "Conclusion (1972)" begins with a statement: "Looking back over this book, even after a short distance of time, it strikes me that it was written at the beginning of a transitional period which is not yet over. What marks this period, I think, is the delayed encounter of the cinema with the 'modern movement' in the arts" (1972, p. 155). In the post-68 culture of the times, the concept of artist and auteur (in the romantic of structuralist interpretation) would be rejected (Harvey, 1978; Heath, 1981; Rodowick, 1994; Rosen, 2008).

Wollen makes an effort to preserve the figure of the director, but not in the former understanding as a creator but rather as an excuse with which to refer to a construction or critical deciphering of the film's meaningful structures. It's here reading "John Ford" where we no longer need to understand the person but rather the denomination given the result of a critical operation that distills a configuration of meaning from a group of films made by the same director. The auteur then is the "unconscious catalyst" of unintended meaning:

The structure is associated with a single director, an individual, not because he has played the role of artist, expressing himself or his own vision in the film, but because it is through the force of his own preoccupations that an unconscious, unintended meaning can be decoded in the film, usually to the surprise of the individual involved. The film is not a communication, but an artefact which is unconsciously structured in a certain way. Auteur analysis does not consist of retracing a film to its origins, to its creative source. It consists of tracing a structure (not a message) within the work, which can then post factum be assigned to an individual, the director, on empirical grounds (p. 167-168).

It is for that reason that to Wollen it is no longer a priority to produce an "auteur analysis" on Hollywood. If it were at some point useful it was to discredit the apparent superiority of art cinema associated with elevated culture, separated from its roots in popular culture. Until the mid-1960s, Godard had believed in the possibility of reinterpreting film genres in North American cinema but now, it had taken a different path. It is evident that

Hollywood cannot be ignored but for just reason, it becomes necessary to confront its dominant codes. The future of cinema lies in its capacity to question its own underlying principles and show the contradiction in its language. Wollen warns of the need for change, even though appearing indecisive on which direction to take. If Godard—as always— points the way with his militant group of film makers Dziga Vertov, it is because he has understood that it is not about obediently developing the potential of cinema, but interrogating and questioning its codes (Wollen, 1982). A film is not a medium for expression and communication; it is—and here Wollen cites Octavio Paz— a "machine for producing meaning". These meanings are not simply given, they are produced in the vision of the film, in an ever-renewing dialogue between subject and object. One must observe a dynamic process. Not the auteur nor the structure, now it is about text: "The text is the Factory where thought is at work, rather than the transport system which conveys the finished product" (p. 164).

The above is what gives the new ending a prophetic tone: "It is possible that the transitional period we have now entered into could end with victories for the *avant-garde* which has emerged" (p. 174). It is in this manner Wollen maintains the conviction that film is not a transparent medium and from there many diverse possibilities open up for more radicalized analysis. In effect, his later work would focus on exploring "counter-strategies", not only in cinema but also in photography and other visual arts. In this fashion the dominant art forms are contested by the *avant-garde* and oppositional aesthetic discourse.⁹

Wollen is no longer interested in the auteur as an individual, nor even as a structure. The notion of auteurship becomes diluted, unstable, unplaceable and uncontrollable. It belongs to the text but is produced by the spectator and, before fixing meaning, is preoccupied with rebuilding it. If in the book's first edition Wollen attempted to negotiate between *auteurism* and structuralism, he would now abandon structuralism toward a more post-structuralist notion of auteur as a textual construction. In that shift he would re-valuate the figure of the spectator which, in the following years, would become central to subordinate studies, in the feminist perspective, or in cinematic offers from the third world.

Notes

1. In the face of the proliferation of North American post-war movies, *cinéma de qualité* (Claude Autant-Lara, Yves Allegret, René Clément, Jean Delannoy) constituted, in the beginning, a defense of rational cinema. On Truffaut's questioning of *cinéma de qualité*, see his celebrated article "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français". For a contemporary defense of the attacks on Truffaut, see Carrot (1953).
2. See Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (in particular chapter 1: "Art Worlds and Collective Activity").
3. On the figure of the spectator in relation to these perspectives see, for example, the work of Spivak (1985), Mulvey (1975) and Solanas-Getino (1973).
4. Years later Kitses revises and extends the book in a new edition that included chapters on Ford, Eastwood and Leone (*Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood*, British Film Institute, London, 2004).
5. See the series of articles published by Rohmer in *Cahiers du Cinéma* throughout 1955 and that were later collected into a book (2010).
6. On the opposition between nature and culture in Lévi-Strauss see the "Introduction" to *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1998).
7. See too John Murray, "Robin Wood and the Structural Critics" (1971).
8. It is inevitable to think that Wollen's predilection for John Ford is a contentious point contrasted against Wood's confessed admiration for Howard Hawks. But it is also a settling of scores with *Cahiers du cinéma* that had always valued more Hawks than Ford. It was only in the mid-sixties, when the magazine was taken over by a new generation of critics (Comolli, Narboni, Daney, Biette), Ford was beginning to be considered and undisputedly great artist.
9. In "The Two Avant Gardes", Wollen re-constructs the debate between abstract and post-Brechtian filmmakers on which form of negativity articulates better the notion of cinema critique: a pictorial avant-garde (Stanley Brackhage, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Malcolm LeGrice) and a literary avant-garde (Jean-Luc Godard, Miklos Jancso, Nagisa Oshima, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet). For pictorial avant-garde narration is an exterior element imposed by school of realism and that has to seal the authentic possibilities of cinema expression. In contrast Wollen considers that modern anti-illusionism should cross paths with the referentiality of cinema in a "post-Brechtian aesthetic": it is not about abandoning representation but rather showing the procedures that unite them (1982). The point of inflection in this sense, is the Dziga Vertov Group to which Wollen dedicates a fundamental article: "Godard and Counter-cinema: *Vent d'Est*". Squaring off against the dominant forces of classic realist cinema (but also Bazinian realism which was based on a supposed photographic ontology), the *Counter-cinema* of the Dziga Vertov Group opens the way to an aesthetic committed to political radicalism and formal experimentation in open confrontation with conventional cinema (1982).

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